



THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

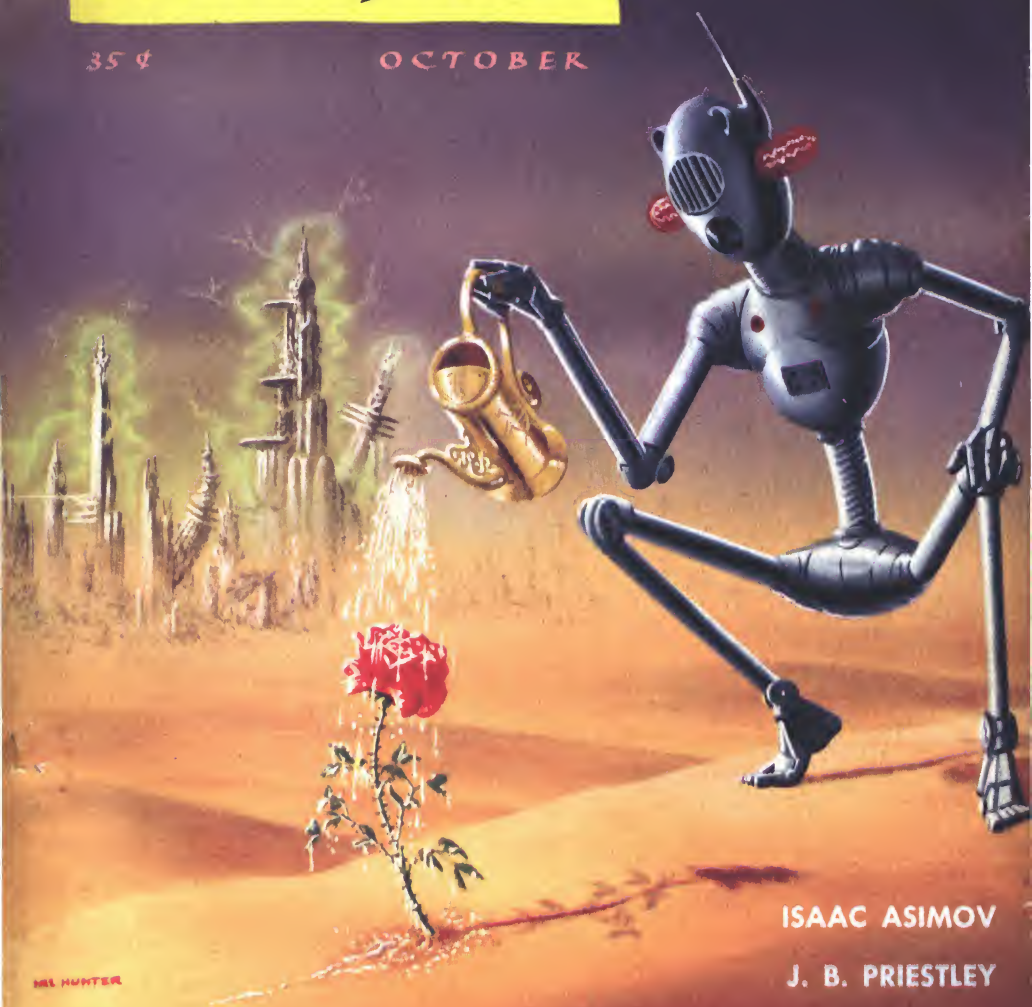
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PROJECT NURSEMAID

a short novel by

JUDITH MERRIL



ISAAC ASIMOV

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To reassure you, I should state in advance that this British import (from that ever terse and delightful magazine Lilliput) does not involve cricket, that (to Americans) most mystifying of all man's athletic endeavors. Instead it concerns itself with such more readily comprehensible affairs as heavy matter, hyper-gravity, the lot of the scientist and the infallible luck of a recently retired Prime Minister.

The Cricket Ball

by AVRO MANHATTAN

THE FERROUS-LIQUID SUBSTANCE crashed to the ground with a heavy thud, concentrated itself into the shape of a ball, rolled slowly out of the shed, reached the middle of the road, then stopped. Its path across the reinforced concrete was marked by a deep furrow, as though it had rolled through clay.

Professor Lay looked at his watch. 3:33 P.M. His experiment had succeeded. He had created a substance of unknown specific gravity which now, by an unfortunate chance, was lying in the middle of the road.

"Here," said P. C. Jelks, "what's this?"

The Professor and the policeman looked at the ball. "It's gone and ploughed up the road," said Jelks. He looked uneasy. "What is it?"

"In certain stars," the Professor said, "the atoms are squeezed in such a way that the matter of which they

are composed is unusually heavy. In Van Maanen, for instance, a star where matter is 300,000 times the density of water, a pinhead would shoot through your hand like a bullet."

"I see," said P. C. Jelks. He seemed to be about to examine his hand, as though this might clarify the situation. "You know best, sir, I'm sure," he said. "Better get it back into your workshop. We don't want to hold up the traffic." P. C. Jelks wished to have nothing more to do with the object.

"I don't think I can," the Professor said. He bent down and tried to pick up the ball. It would not move.

"Is it stuck?" P. C. Jelks asked. He raised his large boot and kicked the ball, then staggered back, clutching his foot. The ball had not moved.

Nobby Clark, from the garage,

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pulled up in his van. "No football here, mate," he told P. C. Jelks, an old enemy.

"It's stuck," Jelks said, too surprised to retaliate.

Nobby got out of the van. He shoved the ball with his foot. "What is it?" he asked the Professor.

"An experiment," Professor Lay said. "Have you any tools? I'd like to get it back into my workshop."

Nobby produced a 7-lb. hammer. He swung it sideways at the ball, giving it all he'd got. The hammer bounced back. Nobby gave a roar, dropped the hammer, and sucked his fingers.

"That blow would have dislocated at least 300-lbs.," Professor Lay said. "Most interesting. The ball must weigh more."

The local fire-engine swept round the corner, summoned by P. C. Jelks. The firemen looked at the ball. As usual, their talent for improvisation came to the rescue. They laid the loop of a wire hawser round the ball, and made the other end of the hawser fast to the fire-engine. The driver of the fire-engine started off slowly in first gear. The hawser snapped a minute later, making a considerable mess of the fire-engine.

A police car drew up. Four policemen in flat caps jumped out. Soon afterwards the road was cordoned off, and a screen of sacking was erected round the ball. The Prime Minister was informed, and a guarded statement given to the newspapers, to the effect that a mishap in the

neighbourhood of a War Office experimental station had placed a small area out of bounds to the general public. There was, however, no cause for alarm, as no radioactive materials were involved.

The three War Office brass-hats arrived in time for tea, which was provided by local representatives of the Women's Institute and served in the screened-off space by P. C. Jelks.

"Professor Lay," the General said, "we don't like this publicity. Most unbecoming."

"The ball rolled out of my workshop," the Professor explained. "Some sudden, extra-gravitational pull. I was unable to stop it."

"Get a tank crane," the General snapped.

It was some time before the crane crew could get a satisfactory grip on the object. They tried digging out the concrete around it but as they did so the ball seemed to sink further in. Eventually they modified a grab to grip the ball like a vice.

The crane's engine roared. The hawsers hummed. The crane visibly vibrated with the vast effort it was making. The ball did not move.

"Give it full throttle, man!" the General shouted. "It's Government property."

The grab broke. So did the crane boom. They had to send to Aldershot for another crane to remove the first one. The General and the other brass-hats returned to the War Office, to write reports about faulty equipment now being provided for

Her Majesty's Forces by civilian concerns which should certainly be brought under immediate military discipline.

Next morning the national newspapers — their source of inspiration being Nobby Clark — had whipped the nation into such a state of anxiety about Professor Lay's object that crowds gathered outside Downing Street shortly after breakfast. Everyone present — men, women and children — were insistent that something must be done. There had even been a cable from the Australian Premier asking what steps were being taken to prevent the ball falling right through the centre of the earth and coming out the other side, possibly wrecking the wicket so carefully prepared for the Fourth Test.

The Prime Minister himself appeared several times on the steps of No. 10, giving the V-sign. As a method of raising the ball, however, it seemed to be inadequate.

By lunch time there were even more dramatic developments. The extremist wing of the Opposition, at the same time as demanding the resignation of the Government, suggested that Britain's hydrogen bomb should be dropped on the offending ball, thus removing it and a predominantly Tory constituency at the same time.

The American Air Force, using jet bombers from Greenham Common, flew in the world's biggest crane in sections — a 250 tonner. Krupps, of Essen, 'phoned to say that in another

hour's time they would have completed a 500 ton crane.

After lunch the Prime Minister left Downing Street by car to examine the problem on the spot. He was now seen to be giving the V-sign with a ping-pong ball held between the fingers.

The site by now was a maze of temporary railway lines, cranes, fire-engines, troops, trades union representatives and, on the outskirts, grandstands erected by Butlin's Holiday Camps, Ltd. The P.M. made his way through to the inner screens with difficulty.

"I'm sorry about this, sir," the Professor said. "Somewhat unforeseen complications."

The P.M. grunted. He looked at the ball, which by now had become highly polished by the various lifting devices which had been clamped round it. He poked at it angrily with his walking stick. The ball jumped out of the groove in which it lay, and rolled gently down the camber of the road, to come to rest in the gutter.

Professor Lay laughed. He looked at his watch. 3:33 P.M. "I should have thought of that," he said, "An unstable compound. Its molecular structure deteriorates after —" he looked at his watch again — "twenty-four hours. I must see what I can do about it."

He picked up the ball and put it in his pocket. "A scientist's work is never done," he said. He went into his workshop and shut the door.